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SECULARIZATION OF SACRED MUSIC

By G. EDWARD STUBBS

IN THE development of ecclesiastical art there have always been questions which have caused perplexity and controversy regarding the fitness and the unfitness of certain forms of expression. Religious painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture, and music, have all furnished problems without number in the past, many of which have been connected more or less intimately with radical reform. Some of them seem to have been solved permanently; others have received temporary adjustment, only to require from time to time further consideration.

The question of secularization of sacred music is a never-ending one; for the problems involved do not decrease in number or become more simple—they seem to increase and grow more intricate. The reasons for this complexity are various.

The psychology of music is an abstruse study, full of theoretical mysteries. Even trained philosophers and metaphysicians indulge in conflicting opinions regarding emotionalism and intellectualism in their practical relation to musical worship. It is then not surprising that among the majority of people there is, and perhaps always will be, a disagreement of opinion as to the real nature of music, and the wisdom and unwisdom shown in the application of its different forms to sacred worship. Moreover, with the constant change in religious thought, and with the apparently inevitable multiplication of “denominations”—perhaps we should say churches—there have arisen systems of so-called worship music which are kaleidoscopic in their variety.¹ These overlap each other, and influence each other in innumerable ways.

Scores of liturgies (the word is used here in its broad sense to denote any form of public worship) have come into existence, each calling for its own kind of choral setting, or form of musical service. These choral forms reflect the influence of tradition when there is a musical usage of sufficient age and force to make perpetuation logically desirable. In the absence of acknowledged custom they may be governed by the laws of consistency. Or

¹According to the latest statistics, there are in the United States more than one hundred and sixty separate religious denominations.

they may be moulded to suit what many clerical modernists delight in calling "present-day conditions," in which case they become elastic enough to be described as formless forms.

It has, therefore, become difficult to give a short, comprehensive, and scientific definition of church music as it exists to-day in the United States. The term should be restricted to music suitable to the worship of Almighty God. In reality it is extended to music ordinarily heard in the various churches. It includes the ancient and traditional music of the three great pre-Reformation bodies, the Greek, the Roman, and the Anglican, in traditional and untraditional forms, (pure and impure), and in addition, music that is more or less familiar to the millions of persons who are not connected with these bodies. Furthermore, vast numbers of individuals who do not belong to any particular religious denomination attend church services with a certain amount of regularity, or irregularity. The music listened to by this enormous multitude is a heterogeneous compound. Some of it, styled sacred music, is characterized by the total absence of any religious quality. Much of it might be called "church music" merely because it is used in buildings called churches.

The term church music, then, as used by the masses, has lost its ancient and distinctive meaning. It now signifies "music commonly heard in churches." It embraces the worship music of all religious bodies, and includes compositions of widely varying degrees of fitness and unfitness.

There is a commensurate difficulty in explaining the term "secularization," as applied to church music. In the minds of many persons there exists a border-land, so to speak, between the sacred and the secular. The degrees of latitude and longitude in this territory vary according to the strictness or the looseness of the viewpoint.

Voyagers sailing on the Amazon often do not know when they are in the river and when they are out of it. There are thousands of people to whom the musical border-land mentioned is a veritable Siberia in extent. The existence of this hazy region shows the desirability of establishing definite boundaries. It is one thing, however, to draw lines of demarcation and quite another thing to make them distinctly visible to those who are not particularly desirous of seeing them.

Some things can be well defined by their opposites. Secularized church music is perhaps best explained by stating the characteristics it does not possess—those of true sacred music. These attributes have never been set forth more clearly than

they are in the remarkable document issued at the Vatican on the Feast of St. Cecilia, patroness of Church Music, November, 1903. This valuable Instruction in Sacred Music is vaguely supposed by the man in the street to be merely a dull dissertation on plain chant, ordering it to be used throughout the Roman Church to the general exclusion of all other music.

It is unfortunate that Protestants, as a class, know little or nothing about it. It is certain that very few think that there can be any possible connection between the teaching of Pius X and the musical enlightenment of persons outside the Roman Communion.

There are, however, documents capable of exerting an influence far beyond the circles for which they were originally intended.

The Constitution of the United States, for example, deals specifically with the political structure of this republic. Yet it involves principles of government of importance to all mankind. The Motu Proprio deals specifically with the musical requirements of the Roman Liturgy, yet it is a message to be heeded by all Christians who utilize music in the worship of the Almighty.¹

It is not necessary to quote at great length from the edict in order to show by its condemnation of secularized church music what that music is. The Introduction to the Instruction states that, among the cares of the pastoral office, not only of the "Supreme Chair" but of every local church, a leading one is without question "that of maintaining and promoting the decorum of the House of God in which the august mysteries of religion are celebrated, and where the Christian people assemble to receive the grace of the Sacraments, and to unite in the common prayer of the Church in the public and solemn liturgical services. Nothing should have place in the temple calculated to disturb or even to diminish the piety and devotion of the faithful; nothing that may give reasonable cause for indignation or scandal; nothing, above all, which directly offends the decorum and the sanctity of the sacred functions and is thus unworthy of the house of prayer and of the Majesty of God."

The statement then follows that there is a distinct abuse affecting sacred music. "Indeed, whether it is owing to the very nature of this art, fluctuating and variable as it is in itself, or to the succeeding changes in taste and habits with the course of

¹Readers of THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY may find the Motu Proprio almost in its entirety in the issue of January, 1915, under the heading: "Music Reform in the Catholic Church," by Monsignor H. T. Henry, D.D.

time, or to the fatal influence exercised on sacred art by profane and theatrical art, or to the pleasure that music directly produces, and that is not always easily contained within the right limits, or finally to the many prejudices on the matter, so lightly introduced and so tenaciously maintained even among responsible and pious persons, the fact remains that there is a tendency to deviate from the right rule, prescribed by the end for which art is admitted to the service of public worship."

From the Instruction itself we quote: "As an integral part of the solemn liturgy, sacred music participates in its general aim, which is the glory of God, and the sanctification of the faithful. Its principal office is to clothe with a fitting melody the liturgical text proposed for the understanding of the faithful, so its peculiar object is to add to the text itself a greater efficacy."

"Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and particularly the sanctity and the correctness of form, from which has arisen its other characteristic of universality. It ought to be sacred, and for that reason exclude every secular element, not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is performed. It must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible to exercise on the souls of the listeners that efficacy which the Church desired when giving it a place in her liturgy."

It is then stated that the qualities of sacred music are to be found in the highest degree in the Gregorian chant, and also in the classic polyphony which reached its greatest perfection in the sixteenth century. Full liberty, however, is given to use modern music under certain reasonable restriction.

"Modern music is also admitted in the Church, since it, too, furnishes compositions of such excellence, sobriety, and gravity, that they are in no way unworthy of the liturgical functions. Since, however, modern music has risen mainly to serve profane uses, greater care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church may contain nothing profane, be free from reminiscences of motifs adopted in the theatre, and be not fashioned even in their external forms after the manner of profane pieces."

A statement which is of extraordinary importance as bearing upon this whole question of secularized music is as follows: "In general, it must be considered to be a very grave abuse when the liturgy in ecclesiastical functions is made to appear secondary to and in a manner at the service of the music; for the music is merely a part of the liturgy and its humble handmaid."

It must be admitted by all that the Motu Proprio furnishes a description of sacred music which defines in no uncertain way its opposite, secularized church music. Intended as a specific Instruction to Roman Catholics it is a lesson, and a much needed one, of value to Protestants who are unprejudiced enough to see its general application to abuses which are everywhere apparent.

If we detach from it all that refers directly and exclusively to the Roman Liturgy we nevertheless have in the residue a compilation of general principles which should be observed in the musical worship of God no matter where it may be offered. Indeed, if we were to change its name and call it "A Compendium of the Laws of Consistency in all Church Music" the title would be strictly appropriate. This illuminating Instruction defines sacred and secularized music so clearly that it reduces the borderland between the two to negligible dimensions, if not to total extinction.

Of all the religious bodies of Christendom the Roman Church is the only one that has in very recent times inaugurated a thoroughly organized campaign against unchurchly music.

It may well be asked why there is no active and definite crusade made against impure music in the other communions. Is there no need of it? Or less need than in the case of the Roman Church? If there is room for reform where individualism (a prolific source of secularity) is at its lowest degree of influence, as it is in the Roman Church, there is assuredly room where it is at its highest, as it is in many of the other bodies.

Surprise is sometimes expressed in certain musical circles that the Episcopal Church is apathetic in regard to this matter of reform. Although vigorous steps are being taken to revive ancient traditional music and to correct certain choral abuses in the Church of England, in the American Branch of the Church (Protestant Episcopal) there is no similar movement on foot.

The Anglican Church enjoys extraordinary advantages not possessed by its American Branch. It is an Established Church, having an ancient tradition in music, which is kept alive in large numbers of Cathedrals crowded into a comparatively small space.

The area of England is approximately the same as that of the state of New York. Within the borders are no fewer than thirty-two Cathedrals of the first rank. In addition there are fourteen Collegiate Churches and Chapels, and about twenty large Parish Churches which count as Cathedrals as far as music is concerned. In all there are at least sixty-six important

ecclesiastical centres of musical influence, in a territory of only fifty thousand square miles.

In this country of three million square miles there is but one Cathedral musically worthy of the name. To make conditions similar to those in England the Episcopal Church needs about forty thousand "centres of influence" evenly distributed throughout the land. This would give New York state, for instance, one "centre" for each and every county. Furthermore, there are Anglican musical societies of age and power which exert a restricting and deterring influence upon the growth of impure music. There are no such societies in the Episcopal body.

There is, in fact, no organized movement of importance against secularity in church music in any of the churches in the United States with the exception of the Roman.¹

Nevertheless, encouragement is to be found in the increasing facilities of modern travel which are constantly bringing far distant places into closer touch with each other. The improvement of sacred music in the Episcopal Church during the past half-century is largely owing to the fact that clergymen and organists now visit England by thousands instead of by dozens, as was formerly the case.

It is well for those who indulge in a dismal view of musical progress to take a look backward. The period 1855-1865 will provide the pessimist with an interesting retrospect.

In all matters pertaining to ritual worship (which includes music) the Anglican Church was then beginning to reap the full benefit of the Oxford Movement which had been launched about twenty years previously. The influence of the Tractarians was slow enough in spreading over England; but it was particularly tardy in reaching this country, partly because trans-Atlantic travel was in its infancy.

Church music at the period mentioned, not only in the Episcopal Church, but also in many other religious bodies, consisted of chants, hymn tunes of an inferior type, anthems and settings to the Canticles which were invented with the sole purpose of affording personal display to the members of quartet choirs. The personal equation was paramount in every choir.

There was no Eucharistic music, and practically no anthem settings for full chorus. Even the Venite, and the Canticles for

¹The subject of ecclesiastical music is often discussed very seriously in Anglican conventions. Papers are read by eminent authorities, and reforms are effected.

In clerical gatherings in this country every topic under the sun comes up for consideration, with the notable exception of music.

Morning and Evening Prayer, were set so as to give the Messieurs Smith and Brown, and the Misses Jones and Jenkins a "chance" to be heard individually.

Composers (?) degraded their "art" accordingly, and music sellers contrived to furnish attractive folio copies at a dollar each—more or less. The chief thing was the Te Deum. A "pretty" setting would always command a good price if it gave "opportunities" to the quartet. Secularization of sacred music was at its zenith.

The Tractarian Movement changed all this in course of time. That the ancient and traditional Anglican form of service had been strangely neglected began to dawn upon Episcopilians. Quartet choirs and the musical evils peculiar to them gradually disappeared. Chancel choirs of men and boys were organized. Solo singing and the individualism connected with it declined. Eucharistic music was restored. Hymn music began to show improvement.

The general situation may be bad enough now, but it is far from being what it was fifty years ago. There has been a change for the better which has extended in countless circles. For the religious bodies, however they may differ and disagree in matters of theological doctrine, borrow largely from each other in details of musical worship. Improvement coming from one source brings an advance which spreads in many directions.

The Oxford Movement and the musical Encyclical of Pius X may be regarded as two great mainsprings of progress in choral worship. The former has been general in its influence—the latter special. The one, political in its origin, has reached the field of music through an Anglican revival of religion.¹ The other is a sharp and direct attack upon the use of profane music in the Roman Church.

Church music reform is really a part of general religious reform. It is a question of almost infinite extent, and there are plenty of pessimists who consider it too big to be handled outside the confines of the individual religious bodies.

Even in the Roman Church, with the present active propaganda against secularity, discouragement finds voice occasionally. For instance, the St. Louis *Fortnightly Review* printed the following not long ago:

¹The beginning of the Oxford Movement dates from 1833, when the Bill to suppress the Irish bishoprics was passed. The Church was threatened by the State, and the Movement was in a certain sense a political one. Its immediate object was to prevent the Church from becoming a mere creature of the State.

The London *Saturday Review* says: "The music in most Roman churches seems to have fallen at present to a lower level than it has ever known before." The reference is to the Catholic churches of England. Perhaps the war is responsible for this decline. Our country is not involved in war, and yet here, too, there has been, if not a decline, at least no noticeable progress in the matter of church music since the famous Motu Proprio.

If this represents the true state of affairs it would indicate the uselessness of making any definite and determined stand against musical deterioration! Such statements are unfortunate, and do not help the cause at large. In reality, there has been an enormous musical advance throughout the Roman Church, and it has been directly due to the carrying out of the wise teaching of Pius X.

Is it not the plain duty of all religious persons to uphold every concerted movement, and every individual effort to rid church music of secular contamination?

Every voice, no matter how humble, should be raised against the use of worldly and unworthy compositions. It is, however, from the higher authorities that the greatest help can come, and it is to be deplored that so eminent a master as Camille Saint-Saëns has, in a recent paper on Church Music, spoken disrespectfully of the admirable legislation of Pope Pius X. And it is lamentable that he has held up as a model of perfection in sacred music a work that is notorious for its theatrical flavor, and barred from use in many churches, both Roman and Protestant.

In commenting upon the said essay, a Roman authority, Nicola A. Montani, says:

The patriotic Frenchman could have done no greater harm to the cause than to espouse and to hold up for admiration the church music style of Gounod. Particularly unhappy is his selection of the overdone and claptrapish "St. Cecilia Mass," with the continual use of the same materials and operatic tricks found in Faust. To hold this composition as the ideal style of modern church music is indeed demonstrating the weakness and conventionalism of the modern style of sacred music, and only justifies the stand taken by the purists who desire that the atmosphere of the church be preserved by the rendition of music that shall not remind them of some love scene in an ever-popular opera.

As has been stated, the choral customs of the various religious bodies overlap and influence each other. An indication of this is seen in the disuse in Episcopal churches of certain masses that have practically been discarded by the Roman Church as unfit.

The beneficial effect of the Motu Proprio extends further than would appear at first sight. Not only are arrangements of Latin

masses that are "under the ban" going out of vogue in Episcopal churches, but separate parts of such masses are ceasing to be used as "anthems," detached from the Communion Service. It is an encouraging sign that such excerpts are often viewed with disfavor. There are now a great many church-going people who do not fail to understand why a florid setting of the Gloria in Excelsis, for instance, by, let us say, Mercadante, does not become fit for the worship of God because it happens to be arranged to other words, in "anthem form," for use in Protestant churches.

One of the problems that has brought fresh difficulties to those who are working for musical reform is the much-talked-about "Decline in church attendance." A serious drawback is found at present, especially in large cities, in the attitude of certain clergymen who insist upon making church music an attraction *per se*. The clerical cry in too many quarters is not "religion first and music afterward," but "music first—then, perchance, religion."

The excuse is that times have changed. The days of comparative leisure have passed away never to return. The strenuous life confronts everybody. People who have toiled hard for six days are exhausted on the seventh. They seek rest and recreation, mentally and physically. The argument is that something must be done to counteract the innumerable attractions outside the churches. Golf, motoring, tennis, and other outdoor sports claim their devotees by the million. Consequently Sunday is the special day for additional concerts, lectures, recitals, and "movie" shows.

To offset all this the daily papers are filled with advertisements of "church" attractions. Special preachers, with startling topics, are announced. Musical services (sometimes honestly advertised as sacred concerts) receive advance notices on the day preceding the Sabbath.¹ Recitals of secular music by organists, violinists, and other instrumental performers are brazenly offered as extra inducements to attend church. It is very questionable whether these incongruous efforts ever produce any lasting results, of real benefit, to the cause of religion.

¹During the past year two prominent Episcopal churches in New York City advertised extensively a service called "Popular Vespers," consisting very largely of secular music, and "selections" well known to habitués of the Metropolitan Opera House.

At a meeting held in the Brooklyn Academy of Music on May 15th of this year, the pastor of one of the most important Presbyterian churches of New York City said in the presence of more than six hundred ministers and laymen of the Brooklyn Presbytery: "The simple Gospel is not enough. I hope I shall not be misunderstood, but in order to compete with Sunday amusements the modern church must have the best of music and the most interesting services or otherwise the minister will find his congregation drifting away to the movies and the concerts, no matter how spiritual his sermons may be."

In marked contrast is the attitude of the Greek and Roman clergy. They advertise neither preachers nor music, and they never complain of "decline in attendance." Organ concerts are unheard of in the Greek churches—in fact, there are no organs. In the Roman churches organ music is strictly subservient to the requirements of the liturgy. Recitals are prohibited.

Does any sane person believe that the cause of religion suffers in these churches because secular music is forbidden?

Another unsolved problem of importance is that of Sunday School music. It is in the more careful instruction of the young that some of the most successful educational reforms have been effected. For example, the time was (and not so very long ago) when boys devoured dime novels as fast as they were turned off the press. They were read even in school hours, under shelter of the desks. Boys formed their own circulating libraries, and a good, red-hot story with plenty of vim and blood-letting would go the rounds until worn threadbare. One reason for this peculiar craze was that English prose fiction in its best form was not taught in the schools. All this has been changed, and Sir Walter Scott and other standard novelists are no longer unknown to juveniles. Indeed, there are many musicians who think that the first step in the matter of reform in sacred music should begin in the Sunday Schools, and also in the parochial schools. The music sung in such institutions is almost entirely hymn music. But it should be borne in mind that practically all the singing that is done by congregations in churches is hymn-singing. For the most part it is the same kind of hymn-singing that is done in the schools. If children are taught a secular style of sacred music in schools and if afterwards as adults they continue the use of that type, may it not be said that their chief participation in church music is secular?

Old and well-worn adages, such as "We reap what we sow," "Childhood impressions last the longest," etc., etc., seem to have little practical effect upon educators as far as forming correct taste in religious music is concerned. Wrong patterns for children are deliberately furnished. They become indelibly impressed upon the mind, and last through life. Dr. George W. Crile, the distinguished American surgeon, gives, in his recent work, "A Mechanistic View of War and Peace," a terrible illustration of the force of what he terms "action patterns." He maintains that when the brains of the male human machine are filled with patterns of fighting, war becomes inevitable. He contends that the first cause of the European conflict was the implanting of war

images in the minds of children who now as men are taking part in it. "German Kultur is merely one kind of belligerent action pattern in the brains of a whole nation, created by fear of neighboring nations, and by militaristic instruction from childhood up. If Germany were to conquer the world, this fighting impulse left without the foil of feared neighbors, would probably turn upon the German State itself, and destroy it as a cancer destroys a living body." However extreme this view may be, it contains a large amount of philosophic and scientific truth, directly applicable to pedagogics. It is unquestionably true that the teaching of secular tunes in Sunday Schools is largely responsible for the general difficulty now experienced in church music reform.

The *Catholic Chormaster*, the organ of the Society of St. Gregory in America, recently pointed out the urgent need of establishing graded courses of music in schools in order to provide more thorough instruction in sacred music. We quote:

This plan is an absolute necessity if a correct taste is to be developed among our children and if results of a permanent value are to be obtained. The hymns children have been singing in the school and church for generations are, for the most part, an abomination. The real cause of the lack of taste on the part of our congregations nowadays can be attributed to the use of the "jig-tune" hymns. To attempt to change the taste of a person who has heard, during the entire school period, hymns which would better serve as dance tunes or love songs, is almost futile.

Such tunes, however, can be allowed to die out and give place to others.

Dr. Richard R. Terry, the distinguished organist of Westminster Cathedral, London, in his book on Catholic Church Music, says:

One great difficulty in hymn-singing is the tenacity with which the older members of our congregations cling to tunes of such an inane type as "Daily, Daily," "O Mother, I," and the rest of the terrible contents of "The Crown of Jesus" Music. It is not difficult to understand how even the most fatuous tunes can be beloved if they are in any way connected with the hallowed associations of a pious life. Who is he who would ruthlessly deprive these good souls of things which they hold dear? But the difficulty is not insuperable. The writer knows of one church where all these bad tunes were eliminated in the course of a single generation, by a very simple process. At the public services for adults, no change was made in the old tunes, but the children in the schools were never allowed to sing them, and at the children's Mass, and on other occasions, good tunes were substituted for the popular ones sung by their elders. By the time the children had grown to youth

they had become as familiar with and as fond of the good tunes as their elders were of the bad ones, and so the new tradition was established. If our hymnology is to be improved it must be by educating the taste of the younger generation.

It is unfortunate that the question of Sunday School music is not viewed more seriously by clergymen and organists. In most churches this important department of musical worship is treated with neglect bordering upon contempt. It follows the line of least resistance, and simply "muddles along" without any definite pains being taken in the way of advancement. There are, however, brilliant exceptions to the rule. *The Sunday School Times* occasionally mentions certain schools where only the best music is sung, and where inferior compositions are positively disliked by the pupils.

We could cite examples where undesirable tunes are carefully excluded, and where a sufficient amount of trouble is taken to form a taste for the better forms of hymn music. What can be accomplished in one case can, of course, be achieved in another. It is merely a matter of education. If salaried organists were to be appointed for the express purpose of elevating Sunday School music to a higher plane, an effective reformation would certainly result.

When we come to consider methods of reform, we find that although there are hundreds of musical abuses there are practically but *two* sources through which they can be rectified, namely, musicians and clergymen. In Roman circles special efforts are being made to establish schools of church music. In the other bodies such schools have not yet made their appearance. But there is nothing more encouraging to those who have the cause of sacred music at heart than the marked progress made during the past thirty years by American colleges and universities in recognizing the importance of general musical study by giving it its proper place in the regular academic curriculum. Chairs of music have been established in many of the more prominent institutions of learning, and every year brings additional endowments for the furtherance of musical learning. The instructive article which appeared in THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY, October, 1915, by Mr. W. J. Baltzell, entitled "The American College Man in Music," gives a remarkable summary of what American colleges have accomplished in higher musical education during the past few years. No less than three hundred college graduates, representing sixty-five institutions, are now employed in the musical profession in various parts of the country. That

they exert a beneficial influence over sacred music is beyond all question.

With the advance of civilization comes commensurate progress in all the arts and sciences. It cannot be denied that the masses are being (as the common expression is) "educated up" to an appreciation of the higher forms of music. Opportunities for hearing the best compositions, both vocal and instrumental, have increased greatly within the past quarter of a century, and the effect has been to make the public standard of judgment higher. This general advance in taste must touch religious music in some degree, however slight.

Paradoxical as it may appear, secularization of sacred music means in its very highest sense its sanctification. For in its most exalted form secular music exhibits one of the chief characteristics of any perfect art—consistency—the one thing needful in ecclesiastical music, the one quality which embraces in full the entire teaching of the *Motu Proprio*.